

So I'm doing a guy thing. I'm renovating my basement. And being the clever guy that I am, I'm multitasking. As I pound nails with my nail gun I'm pondering my next greatest effort in my comfortable, middle-class world of children's literature. I'm thinking guy thoughts.

I should do a book about an action hero with lots of battles and sword waving. Maybe a lady could be saved and the guy could get rich! The hero, of course, would be muscled and

would be so cool. A boy and a girl try to tell their favorite fairy tale, but they can't agree on how the story should be told. Fantastic!

I race upstairs to start the project, but not before I remove the nails that hold my shoe to the baseboard.

This is how I write. When a good idea pops into my brain, it forms itself as the whole shebang. The beginning is there and so is the end. The middle is a little muddled but workable.

In the case of *Once upon a Cool*

truth is, I can't draw "pretty" to save my life, and I've never been good at drawing muscles (not hard to believe if you see me in person).

As I looked over my "dummy book," I realized that I could never draw the pretty princess pictures that make up the little girl's vision. For that matter, I couldn't draw the dude pictures either. This book needed to push the idea of gender differences even further. I decided I wanted three illustra-

tors to tell this story: I would draw the boy and girl characters, and two others artists would illustrate their stories. Next I needed to find a publisher who would agree to this plan.

Emily Easton, the talented head of Walker & Company, and I have been working together for years.

She respects my brilliance and nurtures my talent. When I approached her with my concept, she said, "Knucklehead, do you realize how much more work this is going to be?" But we went ahead and started to look for other illustrators. Using the Internet, the local library, and children's bookstores, Emily and I were able to come up with a list of artists we thought might work.

We decided we should choose a woman to illustrate the girl's story



brave. He would ride off into the sunset like John Wayne, and the lady would wave to him as a tear rolled down her cheek. Now, that's a book!

For 20 or so years my wife and I have worked together in the same house day after day. She's used to hearing me explain my next incredible book idea. Her respect for me has grown over the years. It's understandable—I'm a children's book hottie.

"I have another great idea for a story," I say. I explain the book to my wife.

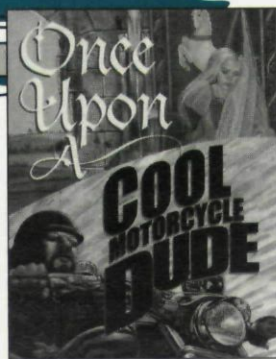
She uses one of her favorite pet names for me. "Knucklehead," she says, "did you ever think that it's moms who buy the books? That it's the girls who really like to read? Maybe you should consider writing for the other half—the better half."

I ponder my wife's suggestion as I finish nailing off the studs. It suddenly occurs to me to try to tell a story from both sides of the gender divide. It

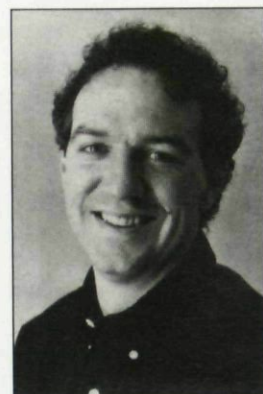
*Motorcycle Dude*, the package fell together in the form of an argument between a boy and a girl in front of their class. I closed my eyes, so to speak, and imagined the two kids talking, fighting, yelling, and generally disagreeing over how to tell their favorite fairy tale. For inspiration I thought of my years of marriage, my fights with my sister, and all the failed relationships I've had with the "enemy" over the years.

Once I had the kids figured out, I had to make the story fit the standard 32-page format of most picture books. With this task complete, I was ready to draw the pictures.

I've been drawing since I was a little kid. I've come to realize that, while I'm no slouch at drawing, there are many folks out there who can draw a whole lot better than me. The



Kevin O'Malley





and a man for the boy's part. For the princess pictures, there were two schools of thought. They could be rendered in the Victorian style that's popular in fairy tale illustrations, or they could be illustrated in candy colors, sweeter, with a touch of Disney. For the little boy's story we wanted an aggressive illustrator. Strong colors, forced angles, and unique perspectives.

After many weeks of searching we found the very talented Carol Heyer and Scott Goto. I sent them each the dummy book I had created and told them they were free to redesign my pencil sketches in any way they wanted. My basic instructions were to be as over the top with their drawings as they felt they could go. Scott lives in Hawaii, and Carol lives in California. I've never met or even spoken to them, in person or on the phone. We sent everything through e-mail and FedEx.

If you're lucky enough to find tal-

ented people to do a job, and you're able to let them alone to do their work, you can get really great results, and that's what happened with this project. Over the following weeks Carol and Scott sent drawings over the Internet, and every one of them fit the project to a tee. I'm not kidding. Carol's drawings captured that beautiful, romantic world of unicorns and girls with dopey pointed hats. Scott's pictures are full of the energy of the heroic male, swashbuckling and seriously guy. You can practically smell the testosterone. They even agreed to have their art combined on the computer in the scenes when the kids come together to finish the story. True professionals.

*Once upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude* is a hoot, if I do say so myself. I've heard people reading the story aloud, and I'm so pleased that it's so clearly understood. It's great fun to listen to a grown-up read the book to a group of

kids. They interpret the princess just right, and their "dude voice" cracks me up.

How we pick books says something about our gender and our differences. Why a little boy loves swordplay, battles, and bulldozers or why a girl starts to love ponies I don't know. But I do know that this is an idea worth keeping in mind whether you're choosing books for kids or for the adult who reads books before bedtime.

### Sampling O'Malley

O'Malley, Kevin. *Once upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude*. Illus. by Scott Goto, Carol Heyer, and Kevin O'Malley. 2005. 32p. Walker, \$16.95 (0-8027-8947-1). Gr. 2-6.

Kevin O'Malley is exceedingly lucky to be doing the work he's doing. He lives with his long-suffering wife and children in Baltimore, Maryland.



## Thigh Slappin' Read-Aloud Fun!



**RAILROAD JOHN AND THE RED ROCK RUN**  
Tony Crunk / Illustrated by Michael Austin  
ISBN 1-56145-363-3 / HC / \$16.95 / Ages 4-8

A riotous tall tale featuring a colorful cast of memorable characters and delightfully clever twists of plot and prose

"Kids will eagerly climb aboard for repeat rides."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"It's mighty tall-tale telling, just waitin' for a teller and a passel of kids." —*Kirkus Reviews*



**THE GOLD MINER'S DAUGHTER  
A MELODRAMATIC FAIRY TALE**  
Jackie Mims Hopkins / Illustrated by Jon Goodell  
ISBN 1-56145-362-5 / HC / \$15.95 / Ages 4-8

An hysterical collision of fairy tales, "Perils of Pauline" style melodrama, and the Gold Rush West

"Goodell's delightful and action-packed illustrations feature expressive characters and plenty of visual humor." —*School Library Journal*

PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS  
1700 CHATTAHOOCHEE AVENUE • ATLANTA, GA 30318-2112  
Phone 800-241-0113 or 404-876-8761 • Fax 800-875-8909 or 404-875-2578  
www.peachtree-online.com

Copyright of Book Links is the property of American Library Association / Booklist Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.